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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: COOKED STATS, RAW NERVES: UPBEAT PROTEST NUMBERS
VEIL CHINA'S SOCIAL STRAINS

REF: A. BEIJING 1698

[1](#)B. GUANGZHOU 398
[1](#)C. 06 BEIJING 4762

Classified By: Political Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton.
Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) China's Ministry of Public Security has made a point in the early part of 2007 of publicizing statistics showing that "mass incidents" across China are on the wane, particularly in rural areas. MPS Vice Minister Liu Jinguo announced in January that the number of "mass incidents," which he did not define, declined by 16.5 percent in 2006. But our reading from contacts is that official statistics related to protests are highly suspect. Local officials underreport the flare-ups and Central authorities likely cook the numbers anyway to create a perception of progress in addressing China's pronounced social disparities. Recent confrontations between protesters and police in Hunan and Jiangxi provinces (ref A) indicate that many of the root causes of protests past -- such as land disputes and graft -- are as prevalent as ever. Against this backdrop, a recent article in the influential weekly Study Times urged local officials to resist using force to quell protests, a signal that regardless of the statistics, top leaders remain very concerned about ongoing threats to social stability. End Summary.

Strange Math

[1](#)2. (C) Releasing statistics about social disturbances has become a winter ritual of sorts for the Chinese Government. At a press conference in January, MPS Vice Minister Liu Jinguo said the number of "mass incidents" in China declined by 16.5 percent in 2006. Also in January, Chen Xiwen, director of the Central Rural Work Leading Group, announced that the number of "mass incidents" nationwide fell by some 20 percent last year, to 23,000, adding that about half were in the countryside. (Note: The figure is confusing because in January of last year, the MPS stated that in 2005, there were some 87,000 "disturbances of public order" across the country; by Chen's count, the number of "mass incidents" for 2005 would have been closer to 30,000. End note.) Regardless of the difference between Liu and Chen's math, the statements represent the first official reports in recent years of positive progress in reining in protests. The 87,000 "disturbances of public order" figure constituted an uptick over statistics leaked to

outside sources in January 2005 indicating that the MPS tabulated some 74,000 "mass incidents" in 2004. In addition, an official Xinhua News Service report from 2005 pegged the number of "mass incidents" in 2003 at 60,000.

13. (C) How security authorities differentiate a "disturbance of public order" from a "mass incident" remains unclear. The term "mass incident" has no legal definition. Nonetheless, a 2005 article on the website of the China Law Society (an official organization of Chinese legal scholars and professionals) argued that "mass incidents" have two main characteristics, namely 1) they involve large numbers of persons, from tens to hundreds and 2) about two-thirds of the incidents pit regular citizens against government authorities seen as failing to fulfill their official duties. A "disturbance of public order," however, is a legal term in China's criminal code that covers 37 offenses, including unsanctioned public assembly and obstruction of justice, among others.

Skepticism About the Stats

14. (C) None of the Chinese media or academic contacts we spoke with on the subject said the statistics, whatever they measure, are reliable. "Everyone is suspicious of the numbers," said Lin Mei (protect), a professor of sociology at the Central Party School. The Government wants to give the impression to both domestic and international audiences that its policies, such as the New Socialist Countryside and others initiatives meant to address social

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disparities, are working. In connection with this, the assumption in media and academic circles is that the statistics on incidents are doctored to show that things are constantly improving, Lin said. Zou Xueyin (protect), a professor at the Ministry of Civil Affairs training college who focuses on grass roots governance issues, said it is difficult to assess whether the number of protests is trending up or down, although he judged that the true figures are probably higher than what the Government is quoting.

Bitterness in the Village

15. (C) The ongoing concern at the highest levels stems from the fact that the underlying factors causing social discord in China remain and in some respects are getting worse, said Zou. Reliable statistics are hard to come by, but Zou and other contacts estimate that corruption, land grabs and environmental degradation are the most common complaints touching off protests. Moreover, disparities between coast and interior, rich and poor and urban and rural residents are as pronounced as ever. Lin of the Central Party School said bitterness abounds in the countryside because many rural residents feel they have borne the cost of China's modernization and "paid" for the growth of the boomtowns whose residents reap a disproportionate share of the benefits. Originally from rural Hunan, Lin related that her childhood home had a dirt floor and that obtaining nutritious food was often a challenge. Her brothers never moved away from the village. They now own their own (more modern) homes and drive motorcycles. They regularly eat meat and eggs. But they remain resentful of the development lag between themselves and their urban counterparts.

16. (C) At the same time, rural residents are

increasingly aware of their legal rights and have new tools for gaining information, said Deng Yuwen (protect), an editor at Study Times, an influential weekly newspaper published by the Central Party School. Access to the Internet may be uneven, but farmers have cell phones and can communicate with each other about local events, he observed. News of protests and the incidents that spark them spread fast via cell phone text messages. In Guangdong, where new reports of unrest seem to emerge almost daily, locals also have easy access to Hong Kong media (ref B). At the same time, local governments have failed to keep up with the changing times. The bureaucracy remains slow and unresponsive. Regular citizens tend to view lower level court systems as political tools of the local elite, not impartial mechanisms for dispute resolution. A cadre's ticket up the career ladder comes from ensuring economic growth, despite much discussion of reform on that score, our contacts said. In this context, when protest activity erupts, the instinct is to suppress it and then cover up the fact that it ever occurred, Deng observed.

17. (C) Wang Kegin, an investigative reporter for the China Economic Times, separately made a similar point, adding that the upbeat figures are meant to demonstrate progress in the run-up to the 17th Party Congress this fall. Mindful of this, and keen to preserve their credentials for promotion, local officials often fail to report episodes of unrest to the national MPS, said Deng of Study Times. Criteria for promotion in the Party continue to be keyed to economic performance, local employment levels and maintenance of stability. Deng said that for their part, central authorities worry that local officials' poor handling of protests could serve to fray public confidence in the Party's authority.

Study Times Piece Urges Restraint

18. (C) In connection with this, the Study Times caused a stir in March when it ran an article urging local governments not to use force when handling public protests. In unusually specific terms, the piece said security officials should only use force in cases where mass incidents have violated laws and regulations and that use of firearms should be avoided except in extreme circumstances. It went on to say that authorities should resolve disputes through negotiation, adding that violent crackdowns only serve to intensify conflicts. The article was by Mou Junfa,

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Deputy Director of the Institute of Law Enforcement, part of the Commission on Politics and Law under the Central Committee. Politburo Standing Committee member Luo Gan is the Commission's Secretary and Minister for Public Security Zhou Yongkang is its Deputy Secretary, indicating that Mou's suggestion has the support of the Chinese leadership. The aim of the article, according to Deng, was to make it known that the Central Government is paying close attention to how local authorities address social stability issues.

"Police and Thugs in the Same Family"

19. (C) The Study Times article appeared on the heels of a violent protest in Hunan province that vividly illustrated the stability challenges China faces. The clash between residents and police occurred when a private bus company drastically increased fares. The incident spun out of control when a student was reportedly killed in the tumult. To quell the conflict, the bus company allegedly brought in hired

thugs to add muscle to the local police force that was attempting to calm the situation. This prompted rumors that the local authorities were in league with the bus company all along in an effort to soak the regular passengers. Deng and other contacts said the hiring of heavies to disperse rallies is a regular occurrence and that often local police forces provide them with fake uniforms. The practice only serves to increase tensions and exacerbate public skepticism about the police. In fact, doubts about security officials' honesty remain rampant in Chinese society, Deng said, citing a popular Chinese aphorism that translates roughly as "police and thugs are all in the same family."

Comment

¶10. (C) Despite such common complaints and the shared traits of many incidents, no national connective tissue linking the protests has emerged. Concern about the rise of an organized movement is what motivates the Party's populist policy initiatives -- as well as its rhetoric and measures to control media reporting on unrest. It is also likely what keeps top leaders awake at night.

RANDT